THE ACQUIREMENT AND DIFFUSION OF KNOWLEDGE.

THE MANCHESTER ATHENÆUM SOIRÉE.

THE sixth annual *soirée* of the Manchester Athenæum was held in the Town Hall, on Thursday in last week, under the presidency of Lord Mahon, and although, from a variety of causes, the pressure of the times in particular, the number of persons present (700) was less than on former occasions, it may be considered as one of the most successful meetings which they have had. The speeches delivered were for the most part admirable. We have not space for half of what was said, but will give some portion, premising that the relative length of our reports is not by any means to be viewed as marking our opinion of the merits of the speakers: we simply give preference to those subjects which relate more particularly to our *speciality*.

Lord Mahon's address, an eloquent and scholarly production, occupied more than an hour. Pointing out the amazing progress which has been made in Manchester, chiefly through discoveries in science, and therefore that it could not be necessary to recommend there the study of science, his lordship pointed out that this study was not too difficult for hours of leisure. Then, urging the value of the study of astronomy and geology, he shewed how public opinion in respect of the latter science had changed, and what important results it had led to. Passing then to historical literature, the speaker spoke eloquently of Athens. It has been the lot, said he, of few amongst us to explore for themselves the remains of that renowned city; yet who is there that has cared or thought for literature at all, who has neglected to explore it in story? Who is there that has not sought to familiarise his mind with those scenes,—to see, as it were, with his mind's eye, the remains of that majestic temple which crowns the Acropolis, and which, even in its present state,—despoiled as it has been by man, scathed as it has been by time,—is yet, perhaps, superior to any other structure in the zenith of its splendour, and fresh from the sculptor's hands? Who is there that does not love to trace in description, and to see with mental eye, the prospect which presents itself from that citadel and temple of ancient Athens? Those marble columns, still standing around those sunny heights of Hymettus; that plain, divided by a scanty stream, and gray with its scattered groves of olives; and beyond, in the distance, the azure expanse of the Ægean sea. You will remember how the scene from that spot has been described by a great poet of the present day:—

> As thus, within the walls of Pallas' fane,
> I marked the wonders of the land and main;
> Alone and friendless, on that magic shore
> Whose arts and arms but live in poets' lore,
> Oft as the matchless dome I turned to scan,
> Sacred to gods, but not secure from man,
> The past returned; the present seemed to cease,
> And glory knew no clime beyond her Greece.

In some branches of science, in many other branches of human knowledge, we have far, indeed, outrun the early Athenians; but in some we have never yet been able to surpass, or even to rival, that great people, which, like its own emblem of Minerva, sprang full-grown and full-armed into life, and, at a time when society was in its infancy, produced works which even the ripest maturity of progress has never yet been able to exceed. For, ladies and gentlemen, you will remember that, great as have been the strides which we have made on other points, the world has yet to seek a sculptor greater than Phidias, or an orator greater than Demosthenes, or a philosopher greater than Plato. And there is one thing, allow me to remind you, which makes the study of Athenian history—(a study which many popular works have rendered easy and delightful of attainment)—come peculiarly home to you, and that is, that in ancient Athens the study of arts and the acquirements of literature were united with, and make to flourish by, the pursuits of commerce. For while these great speculations in philosophy were being pursued in the groves of the Academy, and while Phidias was raising the master-pieces of his art,—at that very time, ships from every clime then known were crowding the wealthy port of the Piræus. And thus it was that with these people the pursuits of commerce were not only joined with, but formed a foundation to, the superstructure of art and literature which still continues to excite our wonder and admiration. Ladies and gentlemen, I imagine that there are few who would doubt that studies of this kind, when fully pursued, must be a great source of improvement and of pleasure; but I should wish to convince you of a fact not less certain, though I think less commonly acknowledged,—that an acquaintance with these scenes of history may advantageously mingle with many details of our common life; that it may lend fresh zest to every pleasure, and enable those who possess them to taste pleasure which those who are destitute of them can never know. Let me take so common and trivial an occurrence as a summer's holiday,—let me suppose a time when many amongst you, released for a time from your more active occupations, are able to enjoy a few weeks' or days' excursion; and let us see whether, in this case, some knowledge of history may not add greatly to the pleasure you would taste. The traveller who ascends the last hill above the lake of Derwentwater, and sees that fair prospect opened before him, will on the summit of that hill find himself amongst the circle of Druids' stones. Now, to those who have not attended to any of the details of the Druids, as Cæsar and Tacitus record them, and as so many modern writers may, if you will, make familiar to you; to those who therefore felt no interest in these Druids, the circle of those stones would seem nothing but a ring of moss-grown fragments of rock, and would be dismissed without a parting thought. But what pleasure would their contemplation afford to him who had embued his mind in some measure with some of the strange traditions which relate to the rude faith of our forefathers; and how much interest would he feel amongst those very stones, in recalling to his mind some traces of their bloody rites (?) or fantastic superstitions? Can you doubt for a moment which traveller, in this case, would enjoy the greater pleasure? Or, on the other hand, had the traveller gone to the right, along the foot of the Cheviots, he would, at nearly every step, encounter the remains of the majestic Roman wall. There, again, to any one who was indifferent to the history of Rome, these remains would seem only so many tufts of matted ivy, and so many heaps of cemented bricks. But he who knew something already, and might wish to know more, of the traces of that wonderful people, who fortified an island as we would a town,—who constructed works whose magnificence in ruins even now astonish us,—such a traveller would find ever fresh delight in every trace and vestige of antiquity which presented itself; and, while enjoying not less than his companion the other delights of the excursion, he would have this great additional source of interest, which the person destitute of that information would be compelled to forego. Dwelling on the pleasures of reading, his lordship said,—there is no man so high as to be enabled to dispense with them; and no man so humble who should be compelled to forego them. Rely upon it, that in the highest fortune and the highest station, hours of lassitude and weariness will intrude, unless they be cheered by intellectual occupation. Rely on it, also, that there is no life so toilsome, so devoted to the cares of this world, and to the necessity of providing the daily bread, but what it will afford intervals (if they be only sought out) in which intellectual pleasures may be cultivated and oblivion of other cares enjoyed.

The Right Hon. Thomas Milner Gibson, M.P., said there was one thing in connection with the Athenæum which rendered it more useful than many societies of a similar kind. There was, he understood, encouragement given to the composition of essays, and also to conferences and discussions by word of mouth. Lord Bacon had said, "Reading simply maketh a full man, but conference and writing make a ready and an exact man." Without we combined with reading the habit of discussion and conference, as well as of writing, we should not acquire that which was almost as important as having knowledge itself,—the readiness to impart it to others with exactness and truth. Such institutions as the Athenæum must have a vast influence in keeping men from the pursuit of purely sensual pleasures. In former times, intoxication in England was the rule, and sobriety pretty nearly the exception, in all classes of life. A century ago, Parliament was occupied in passing penal statutes to put down habitual intoxication, by endeavouring to raise the duties on spirituous liquors by laws known as the "Gin Acts." The pursuit of knowledge was in those days thought dangerous; it was not felt that manners depended upon intellect, and that morals had an intimate connection with literature and the refinements of the arts. They attempted, but signally failed, to restore a better habit in society by penal statutes. In the present age, however, education and the spread of a taste for intellectual pursuits were accomplishing what legislature was then unable to effect. Some time since, at a meeting of the Athenæum, he ventured to predict that such societies would produce beneficial results amongst other educational institutions in the kingdom; and he thought his prediction verified in the late movement in the University of Cambridge, the directors of which were now desirous not to be behind the age in their efforts to extend knowledge, but to make their institution as valuable as possible to society.

Mr. J. D. Morel, author of a work on the "Speculative Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century," made a long and argumentative speech on the importance of combining the theoretical with the practical, and also on the necessity of breaking down prejudices between man and man, and one party and another, and producing, by means of such institutions, and other modes, a free trade in human thoughts.

Mr. Robert Bell, author of the "Life of Canning," &c., in the course of a charming speech, which took with it the feelings of all present, spoke eloquently of the uses and value of books. He said he was almost afraid to use the trite expression, "knowledge is power," but he knew that it was only by repeated blows that truths, however small, were made to tell upon the public mind. If knowledge was power, the diffusion of knowledge must be the diffusion of power. The first great discovery by which this power was enabled to be generally diffused was printing: before that time books were very rare, and even the rich were obliged to resort to libraries, where they were contained. He thought that institutions like the Athenæum were a grand improvement upon the art of printing itself: they had unquestionably the effect of assisting, in the highest degree, this diffusion of power. Many fabulous stories had been written about the arts of sorcery—the sorcerers themselves probably being simply men who were a little in advance of their age. We had descriptions of the caves where these men exercised their mysterious avocations, and we might at times see, upon the stage, representations of the wizard's chamber, with stuffed birds, skeletons, fish, and other strange creatures, to give effect to the incantations to be performed. He might venture to say, however, that no sorcery was ever enacted in a wizard's chamber equal to the sorcery that might be every day witnessed in a reading-room. This was the wizard's chamber of the present age, in which all kinds of information were obtained, and from which they were diffused. Books might be well described as the apostles of mankind; they went abroad teaching the world; they were our best friends and companions—the only ones, indeed, with whom we could never quarrel. The book was always the same. In prosperity and in adversity, its calm philosophy, its pleasant wit and vivacity, with everything that could instruct and console, were still unaltered and unchanged. By books we might, without toil and expense, throw ourselves back into the history of the past, and make familiar friends of the greatest men of all times; we might sit in our arm chair, and make a voyage of circumnavigation, and visit all parts of the globe, without stirring from our own country; and, as Cowper says,—

> "Like the finger of the clock,
> Make the great circuit, and be still at home."

In this great city, which he now visited for the first time, he had, like all other visitors, been struck with the wondrous activity he had everywhere witnessed, and the great memorials of industry and power which every step developed. The people were all practical utilitarians, devoting their whole energies to the development of things that were useful in their progress through life. He might here

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